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ABSTRACT

The use of small instructional groups can make several contributions to college writing courses. First, small group instruction is participatory, it provides helpful feedback, and it fosters higher levels of cognition. There is near universal acceptance of the theory that students of all ages learn best when participating actively in their own learning. In the complex activity of writing, feedback from several sources may be more useful than a single response. Also, students need to learn both to give and to receive feedback, and in small groups the roles of communicator and receiver are rapidly interchanged. Further, the diversity of information, experience, and opinion afforded in the small group can foster such levels of thinking as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Second, the small group mode is uniquely capable of promoting skills specifically related to writing. For example, brainstorming can help beginning writers faced with apprehension or block, while discussion can focus the audience for a writer or help voice the frame of mind necessary for revision. Third, small groups also contribute in the affective domain, in terms of shared student motivation, a sense of individual worth not found in large classes, and student awareness of the many different approaches to writing. (HTH)

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Anne L. Legge

SMALL GROUPS IN COLLEGE WRITING CLASSES: WHY AND HOW

Proponents of small group work are, in my experience, the most chauvinistic of methodologists. They argue that small groups are not only a palatable and effective mode of instruction but also that small group experience teaches social dynamics, decision making, problem solving, and other skills essential for effective citizenship in a democratic society. I do not really doubt that this is true. However, as a beset college writing teacher, I am necessarily less concerned with the general goals of society than with the more pressing needs in my own bailiwick: the need for the clearly stated purpose, the recognizable paragraph, the well structured sentence, the clear and direct style--and I haven't even mentioned commas or spelling.

Furthermore, although I consider myself an advocate of small groups--in literature classes, for example--I have been skeptical about using them in my writing classes. Doesn't small group work eat up an inordinate amount of time? Isn't the writing process in essence a solitary effort rather than a collaboration? Won't peer groups be tempted to socialize rather than work? Or, even if they do work, are they indeed capable of giving the kind of help that is needed by freshman writers?

Recently, however, desperation, the midwife of invention, has prompted me to re-examine my position with regard to the use of small group activities in my community college writing classes. Moreover, both my research and my own recent experience indicate that small groups have definite contributions to make to college writing courses. Let us examine first the rationale for using small groups in college writing classes and then some guidelines to help us utilize them most effectively.

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There are three points to make regarding a rationale for small group instruction. In the first place, the use of small groups is supported by an impressively broad base of learning theory, ranging from humanistic to behavioristic. Furthermore, the kind and degree of cognitive activity that small groups promote dovetail particularly well with the demands of writing courses. And finally, small groups can contribute significantly in the affective domain.

The use of small group instruction is supported by learning theory in that it is participatory, it provides helpful feedback, and it tends to foster higher levels of cognition.

a) Small group learning is prima facie participatory. There is now near universal acceptance of the Dewey-Piaget theorem that students of all ages learn best when they participate actively in their own learning.[1] This principle is buttressed by Malcolm Knowles' "assumptions of andragogy" (Knowles' term for the education of adults, as opposed to "pedagogy," the education of boys), a perspective which becomes increasingly pertinent as the age of college students continues to rise. (At my community college, the average age is 27, and this reflects the nationwide trend.) Knowles' assumptions of andragogy state that, in education as in life, adult learners need to be self-directing, to know that their experience is valued and utilized, and to perceive the relevance of their education to the present or future demands of their adult lives.[2] Contradictorily, however, although learning theory clearly blesses active participation throughout lifelong learning, Thom Hawkins notes that, in practice, students advancing through the educative system are increasingly treated as passive receptacles, "mute consumers of facts rather than active participants in a community of learners."[3] Certainly an effective writing class requires active participation if the students of whatever age are to become writers. In fact, teachers of composition often come to espouse the paradox that writing cannot be taught, but it can be learned.

b) Small groups can provide useful feedback. Behaviorist learning theory has established the importance of prompt and appropriate feedback to reward desired behavior and discourage that which is not desired. In activities of some complexity, such as written communication, it appears that feedback from several sources may be more useful than a single response.[4] Also, the student who tends to regard the instructor as idiosyncratic or just plain "picky" may be convinced by the confused expressions of a jury of peers.[5] In Interpersonal Living, Gerard Egan discusses feedback as a skill that can be learned in small group process. The key word is "useful." Useful feedback is short, direct, objective, and clearly constructive in intent.[6] Students need to learn both to give and to take feedback, and in the small group the roles of communicator and receiver are rapidly interchanged, each enhancing the other.[7]

c) Small group activity is a good way to foster the higher levels of cognition.

> It is possible . . . that small groups encourage a more abstract level of thought than does traditional, receptive learning. The group analyzes and evaluates each member's contribution to the solution of the problem, and various contributions are synthesized into a final group product. Individual members gather information and ideas to present to the group, but all members cooperate in analyzing the information and weaving it into a meaningful statement. These features of group learning involve students in activities which are more complex, more intellectually stimulating, and more sophisticated than the receptive learning typical of traditional schools.[8]

It is surprisingly difficult to design learning strategies that evoke such levels of thinking as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, as well as knowledge, comprehension, and application.[9] However, the diversity of information, experience, and opinion afforded in the small group can foster these more demanding levels of thinking. In fact, the basic skills of successful group interaction assume high level cognition--skills such as clarifying, interpreting, and summarizing what has been expressed in discussion. Indeed, I and many of my colleagues have become convinced that poor writing often stems from thinking that is imprecise, incomplete, and/or illogical. What is needed for an unclear sentence, often as not, is a

rethinking as well as a rewriting. In fact, a tendency to make superficial cosmetic changes rather than architectural corrections is one of the hallmarks of difference between professional and beginning writers.[10]

A second point of the rationale for small groups in college writing classes is that the small group mode is in some ways uniquely capable of promoting skills specifically related to writing. Here are a few examples to illustrate:

a) At the invention stage the writer is concerned with what to say, with content. Beginning writers frequently have difficulty both in choosing a subject and in finding specific and substantive content to develop the subject. To help with invention, I have tried demonstration, models, and--most recently--small groups. Here indubitably two (or more) heads are much better than one; brainstorming was originally intended as a group technique and that is how it works best. Even the sleepiest student can get challenged to join the other members of the group in finding specific details to list describing a penny, a thumbtack, or an aspirin tablet. In my experience, once the student gets the hang of generating specifics, he can usually continue to do so on his own with other writing tasks. Furthermore, for student writing that is underdeveloped and simplistic, the diversity and cross-fertilization of several minds working together can help students begin to see the richness of options available to them in subjects, purposes, modes of development, and specific support data.

b) Although small groups can effectively teach invention, surely one of the main contributions of this technique is to the development of the student's sense of audience. Usually, when I ask a student about the intended audience of a writing assignment, the answer I get is, "You, of course--aren't you going to read my paper?" And if I suggest a sharper focus, the answer is "the class" or "my friends." Often, however, the paper itself demonstrated that the student has not truly attempted to characterize the audience, for audience determines both <u>what</u> is said

(explanatory detail, level of technicality) and how it is said (tone, diction, degree of formality). Fred Standley, in an address to the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two-Year College, later published in the SCETC Newsletter, speaks of the loneliness of the writer for whom there are no live persons to react with puzzlement or pleasure. Instead, the world is unpeopled and the writer is alone with his problem.[11] Peter Elbow puts it this way:

> If you are stuck writing or trying to figure something out, there is nothing better than finding one person, or more, to talk to. If they don't agree or have trouble understanding, so much the better--so long as their minds are not closed. This explains what happens to me and many others countless times: I write a paper; it's not very good; I discuss it with someone; after fifteen minutes of back-and-forth I say something in response to a question or argument of his and he says, "But why didn't you say that? That's good. That's clear." I want to shout, "But I did say that. The whole paper is saying that." But in truth the whole paper is merely implying or leading up to or circumnavigating that. Until I could see my words and thoughts refracted through his consciousness, I couldn't say it directly that way.
>
> Two heads are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material interact better than one head usually can. It's why brainstorming works. I say something. You give a response and it constitutes some restructuring or reorienting of what I said. Then I see something new on the basis of your restructuring and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said. The process provides a continual leverage or mechanical advantage: we each successively climb upon the shoulders of the other's restructuring, so that at each climbing up, we can see a little farther.[12]

In Writing to Be Read, Ken Macrorie recommends that students read their work aloud to a "helping circle" of fellow writers.[13] Sense of audience indeed becomes a reality when the student is faced with a flesh and blood audience of small group members who can register the effect of the written effort and whose reaction is harder to dismiss than the bizarre reactions of English instructors.

c) Another problem in the teaching of writing which small groups can help to solve is revision. Students usually do not know how to revise their writing--really revise it. In the first place, somewhere they have been exposed to a myth that good writers do it all in their heads and then just sit down and write off a perfect draft. (Perhaps the notion derives from Moses on Mt. Sinai.) I find it difficult to convince my students that good writers and professional writers

normally proceed through a series of drafts and revisions to produce that final product which looks as effortless as a ballet dancer's leap--the dancer's grace being likewise the tip of an iceberg of practice, practice, practice. Furthermore, once the need to revise has been established, the ability to do so has yet to be acquired. Beginning writers are woefully unaware of the array of options available to them in sentence patterns, idioms, diction, and punctuation. However, the diverse small group can provide a means of externalizing the thinking necessary for revision: first recognizing the existence of a problem, then providing a selection of alternatives, and finally choosing the best option.

A third point of the rationale for using small groups in writing classes is that this mode of instruction can make a valuable positive contribution in the affective domain. Alienation and isolation are recurrent themes in the art of our existential age because they are realities in our daily lives. Effective communication--which is, after all, what college writing is about--builds bridges so that people can reach one another, and the small group mode of instruction teaches communication not only in the assigned task but also in the very process of interpersonal activity.

Today's college classes contain increasing numbers of nontraditional students--re-entering, adult, minority--and are therefore increasingly diverse. The small group process exploits this mix of varied student ages, vocations, avocations, knowledge, and personal experience. High adult motivation may rub off on a Charlie Casual, and, in turn, Alice Anxious may be reassured to find she is not alone in having trouble getting started on her writing. Adult and re-entering students often have a fragile self-concept, and small group activity may enable them to feel both less alone and more competent as they see the advantage their greater experience and maturity afford them. In Small-Group Teaching, Sharan and Sharan speak to this:

> Small-group teaching draws some of its motivating power from the creation of a social context for learning. The very differences between personalities, which formal teaching tends to ignore, bring interest and a wide range of knowledge and skills to the group. In formal classrooms, uniform standards and requirements often are set up for everyone. Small-group learning, on the other hand, cultivates respect for each person's unique contribution to the collective effort. Students learn that they can say what they think about a topic and do not need to conform to one dominant opinion. The different interests, backgrounds, values, and abilities of the members are, in fact, the group's greatest asset and the source of its potentially creative learning experiences.[14]

In overlarge classes, small groups are a way to provide individualization. The member of a small group feels more valued as an individual than he or she does as a member of a large class, and the small group members can provide the feedback that the student as an individual needs. Sharan and Sharan concur that small group teaching builds positive attitudes through treating students as significant individuals:

> Individuality is the most important contribution a student can make to a group. When he feels that he can communicate directly with his classmates, when he knows that he not only may, but is even expected to cooperate with others, then the group is already exerting a strong positive influence on his learning experience. His motivation to work together with other group members is increased, and he develops positive attitudes toward group activities.[15]

Much has been written lately about the phenomenon of writer's block. In "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block," published in College Composition and Communication, Mike Rose has recorded his experience that writers who have this extreme difficulty in addressing the blank page have been found to vary significantly in such factors as age, education, experience, and ability, but have been found to have one commonality: a rigid rules approach to the process and structure of writing. For example, a rule that the first sentence of a writing must get the reader interested never allowed one student to get beyond that problem. A rule that a essay must always have three main ideas in the body stultified another student writer who could think of only two, or perhaps four. For these students, the

rules did not help--they hindered. The students who did not experience writer's block also used rules, but flexibly as guides, not dogmatically as commandments.[16] Accommodating different individual points of view, different approaches to writing, different sentence patterns and styles would unquestionably move the group members toward an increased awareness of options, provide them with an incentive to experiment, and promote tolerance and flexibility.

By now, it should be apparent that a convincing case can be made for the small group mode of instruction in college writing classes. However, the effectiveness of the instruction will be enhanced if the instructor gives adequate attention to some basic principles of small group activity. Preplanning is essential and should include consideration of such factors as the objectives of the instruction, the size and composition of the groups, the time frame of the activity, and the skills requisite for successful small group work.

In the first place, the instructor should clearly conceive the objectives of the group activity; what it purposes to accomplish. Is its aim comparison of sentences produced in a sentence-combining exercise, peer tutoring on subject-verb agreement, or dirll on rules for correct use of the apostrophe? Or is the small group activity concerned with generating content data for a writing, seeing what it adds up to, and then formulating several possible main idea sentences? A few of the many other possibilities would be teaching an awareness of audience, providing feedback regarding clarity of expression, doing vocabulary exercises, and teaching the revision process by means of a checklist. Although it is essential that teachers preplan the objectives of small group activities, they may opt to be more or less directive. As a rule, it is sound practice to articulate objectives; however, there may be times that instructors prefer to let students discover specific objectives within a stated general goal. For example, the students could be given a writing problem and asked to find their own solutions.

Furthermore, the instructor needs to remember that the size and composition of small groups affect how they function. For a short term specific task with a group of mature students, it is probably not necessary for the instructor to group the students. Instead, students can be asked to cluster themselves into threes or fives. On the other hand, group activities that constitute peer tutoring may necessitate the pairing of a strong student with a classmate who needs help. In other cases, the task of the small group may dictate a particular composition for the groups: varied ages, varied or common occupations, grouping by sex or interests, etc. I like to vary the composition of groups, trying different combinations of students, but some tasks may keep groups working together for a week or longer. In Thom Hawkins' "parceled classroom," inquiry groups are organized for the duration of a quarter course.[17]

The size of small groups is another factor which the instructor must weigh. Dyads may be useful for peer tutoring or drill, but for other objectives, triads may produce the right degree of diversity and participation. Groups of four may result in deadlocks which would be undesirable if decision-making is needed. Five is generally a good size but may be large enough to enable a shy or backward student to be pushed into the background or a lazy student to coast.[18] A study by Schellenberg at the University of Kansas--in this case, discussion groups in a Western Civilization class--found that students have a strong preference for groups of four rather than larger units and concluded that student satisfaction is inversely proportional to group size.[19] In Small-Group Teaching, Sharan and Sharan cite research and summarize the issue of small group size:

> The optimal number of participants in a small learning group is a matter for discussion. Some claim that it is between five and eight persons, others as many as 15. Simple calculation proves that the number of possible interactions increases geometrically as the number of group members increases arithmetically.
>
> Three people can generate six channels of communication; in a four-member group, the number of possible communications jumps to 12. The remarkable fact, however, is that as the number of members increases beyond the small-group stage, the frequency of times each one speaks declines, and so

does the total amount of conversation in the group. . . .

> The optimum number of group members, therefore, seems to be between five and eight pupils. If a long discussion is involved, probably the number should not exceed six; but, of course, this suggestion cannot be a hard and fast rule. When deciding the appropriate group size, consideration must always be given to the nature of the task.[20]

A further aspect which the instructor should preplan is the time frame in which the small group activity is to take place. If there is not sufficient time available, the activity cannot succeed and the small group participants are likely to be frustrated and resentful. A highly structured and specific task requires less time than a broader task which is more student-directed, but thirty minutes is probably a minimum time to allow for any sort of small group activity.[21] In resident colleges teachers may be able to assign group activities as out-of-class work, but it has been my experience that this is difficult to effect in a commuter college.

The instructor should also be attentive to whether students seem to possess the skills necessary for effective group interaction and task accomplishment. For example, group members should be able to concentrate on the task at hand and to listen attentively and respectfully to one another. In order to take stock and move the group activity forward, members from time to time may need to clarify, interpret, and summarize what has been said. Group members at times need to serve as leaders, at times to follow the leadership of another. All of these needs assume skills which group members may or may not possess. Instructors should be sensitive to problems which might stem from the absence of these skills and should assist students to develop group interaction techniques so far as time and competencies permit. Optimally group members should assume responsibility for assessing their group process effectiveness and making constructive, tactful suggestions for improvement.[22] As general guidelines, instructors might use the seven step discussion outline suggested by Johnson and Johnson

for promoting effective group activities:

1. Definitions of terms and concepts
2. Establishment of discussion goals: identification of major themes to be discussed
3. Allocation of time
4. Discussion of the major themes and subtopics
5. Integration of the material (relating material to previous topics and other readings)
6. Application of material (identifying implications of material for self)
7. Evaluation of quality of discussion[23]

Sufficient and appropriatestructure is essential to successful small-group activities, and it is the responsibility of the instructor to organize the activity so as to ensure its success: organizing the groups, setting up the task and objectives, suggesting appropriate resources and strategies, delineating the time frame, and indicating the desired end product. Indeed, the possible variations are almost limitless. For example, the instructor may decide that a too-specific statement of objectives would set undesired limits on the potential of the activity and may choose instead to orchestrate a heuristic approach. Or perhaps one objective is to have the group itself find resources rather than have them provided or suggested by the instructor.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an extensive list of small group activities appropriate to college writing classes. Perhaps, however, a few suggestions will serve to illustrate. In the step-by-step linear approach to writing, the writer generates the content and plans the paper at the prewriting stage. As a small group activity, groups might be given a subject, then asked within a twenty-minute time limit to (a) state as many different purposes as they can for writings about the subject (describe, compare, define, persuade, etc. and (b) postulate as many different readers as they can think of for each subject-purpose combination. When each small group presents a report to the entire class, the variety of options is vividly paraded. Yet a further exercise would be to take the subject-purpose-reader combinations and express them as thesis statements. For this spin-off exercise, the groups could be retained or changed; they could

work with the material they generated originally or trade lists.

To promote specificity, groups of three might be given a short writing expressed in dull generalities: Myrtle Beach is a great place to go for vacation. The beach is fun. The weather is always beautiful. There are a lot of things to do, etc. The group would be given thirty minutes to rewrite the paragraph supplying concrete and specific detail about sights, sounds, smells, and activities. Then the end products could be compared, using an opaque projector.

I mentioned earlier that students characteristically dislike revising their writing and, furthermore, most of them do not know how to revise. If required to do so, they frequently merely recopy with no significant changes other than word substitution. In the Journal of Developmental and Remedial Education, Jeffrey Folks suggests that instructors provide an evaluation checklist to serve as the basis for revision of one another's papers in groups of three or four.[24]

There are a number of books which suggest small group activities suitable for college writing classes. Some which I have found particularly helpful are Strategies for Teaching the Composition Process by Carl Koch and James M. Brazil (Urbana, Il.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978); Writing Exercises from Exercise Exchange, edited by Littleton Long (Urbana, Il.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976); Help! From One to Another, edited by Carol Naab (Dallas: Taylor, 1979); and Brent D. Ruben's Human Communication Handbook, Vol.II (Rochelle Park, N.J., Hayden, 1978).

Clearly there is a sound rationale for small group instruction in college writing classes. Properly planned and executed, small groups can be a valuable, versatile means of involving students actively in their own communicative growth.

NOTES

[1]For a general discussion, see John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York, Free Press, 1944); Jean Piaget, Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child (New York: Orion, 1970).

[2]Malcolm Knowles, The Modern Practice of Adult Education (Chicago: Follett, 1970), p. 39.

[3]Thom Hawkins, Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing (Urbana, Il.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976), p. 5.

[4]Arthur Blumberg and Robert T. Golembiewski, Learning and Change in Groups (Baltimore: Penguin, 1976), p. 28.

[5]Carol F. Laque and Phyllis A. Sherwood, A Laboratory Approach to Writing (Urbana, Il.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977), p. 35.

[6]Gerard Egan, Interpersonal Living: A Skills/Contract Approach to Human Relations Training in Groups (Monterey, Cal.: Brooks/Cole-Wadsworth, 1976), pp. 248-249.

[7]Gerald M. Phillips and Eugene C. Erickson, Interpersonal Dynamics in the Small Group (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 124.

[8]Schlomo Sharan and Yael Sharan, Small-Group Teaching (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology, 1976), p. 12.

[9]Benjamin S. Bloom, J. Thomas Hastings, and George F. Madaus, Handbook on Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), pp. 271-277.

[10]Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers, College Composition and Communication, 31 (Dec. 1980), 378-388.

[11]Fred L. Standley, "Language, Literature, and Learning: Confessions of Premises for English Studies in the 80's," SCETC Newsletter, 8, No. 1 (1980), 73.

[12]Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford, 1973), pp. 49-50.

[13]Ken Macrorie, Writing to Be Read, rev. 2nd ed.,(Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1976), pp. 77-86.

[14]Sharan and Sharan, p. 8.

[15]Sharan and Sharan, p. 7.

[16]Mike Rose, "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block, College Composition and Communication, 31 (Dec. 1980), 390.

[17]Hawkins, p. 14.

[18]Cassandra Book and Kathleen Galvin, Instruction in and about Small Group Discussion (Urbana, Il.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, and Falls Church, Va.: Speech Communication Association, 1975), pp. 15-16.

[19]James A. Schellenberg, Group Size as a Factor in Success of Academic Discussion Groups," in Perspectives on the Group Process, ed. C. Gratton Kemp, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 103-108.

[20]Sharan and Sharan, p. 31.

[21]Sharan and Sharan, p. 36.

[22]C. Gratton Kemp, "Assisting Members Through Skill Development," in Perspectives on the Group Process, ed. C. Gratton Kemp, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 309-315.

[23]D.W. Johnson and F.P. Johnson, Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), pp. 248-249.

[24]Jeffrey Folks, "Improving Rough Drafts: An Evaluation Sheet Technique," Journal of Developmental and Remedial Education, 2, No. 3 (Spring 1979), 7-8.